

Academic Library Leadership After 2020: The Theory of the Case

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December 2020

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Introduction

Recently I was asked by a colleague for some advice on how to think about moving into senior academic library leadership. What follows grew out of that conversation.

In 2020 humpty dumpty fell off the wall. The pandemic killed well over 300,000 Americans, upended the economy, and disrupted social interactions of every kind. The killing of George Floyd caused a racial reckoning unlike anything since the 1960s. The contentious election exposed and exacerbated the country's political, class, and cultural divisions.

When the pandemic hit, higher education responded quickly and send students home and moved to remote instruction in the middle of the spring semester. The summer was mostly lost and the fall brought a mix of in-person and remote instructional strategies, but nothing was normal. It is clear that the pandemic will cause higher education to take a huge financial hit. In the fall a consortium of higher education groups estimated that the cost of lost revenue and for reopening campuses will be \$120 billion.¹ Enrollment for the fall semester was down 4% with a 16% decline in freshman enrollment. Expected cuts in state support for public institutions have yet to kick in. Enrollments are unlikely to quickly recover. The financial pain can be expected to persist well after the pandemic ends.² Cuts to college and university budgets will, in many cases, be severe and they will also likely prove to be long lasting. Academic libraries will take their share of these cuts and probably them some. Commenting on an Ithaka S+R Research Report on COVID-19's impact Jennifer Frederick, Roger C. Schonfeld and Wolf-Eisenberg conclude, "With so many US academic libraries facing cuts, some might be tempted to assume that the sector is bottoming out and will soon recover. To the contrary, we see risks of a further slide... While a more optimistic scenario remains

possible as the political and public health situations develop, it would be irresponsible to forecast that the sector has reached a nadir.”³

Before the pandemic, teaching and learning and scholarly communication were in transition, but the rate of change was slow. The pandemic, and the financial pressures that resulted, have and will continue to accelerate the change. What might have been expected in a decade or two will likely come to pass in three to five years.

So, what will 2020 and what will follow demand of academic library leaders. Probably many things, but I believe the most critical component of leadership after 2020 will be for library leaders to have a clear Theory of the Case.

The Theory of the Case

The notion of the Theory of the Case comes from the law. In law the Theory of the Case is, to quote two definitions:

1. A case theory is a detailed, coherent, accurate story of what occurred... Case theory involves legal theories and factual theories. Legal theories are the legal arguments for why each party should prevail -- claims/causes of action or affirmative defenses. The factual theory is an explanation of how a particular course of events could have happened.⁴
2. Theory of a case refers to the comprehensive and orderly mental arrangement of principles and facts, which are conceived and constructed for the purpose of securing a judgment or decree of a court in favor of a litigant.⁵

The way I propose thinking about the Theory of the Case is forward rather than backward looking. It should be constructed based on the facts of the situation academic libraries currently confront and should construct a plan to move forward that builds from these facts in combination with theory, that is a conception of how the world, particularly the world of the academy and scholarship, works. The result should be a coherent, accurate story of what can, and likely will, occur. It is a map on which you have drawn a route. Importantly, it proposes action. What will you do to get from where you are now to where you want to go? The “you” here is not simply you as an individual, rather it is the academic library you work in and more broadly the academy as a whole. Your Theory of the Case should contain a vision for how the world will change and how you and your library can respond to and effect that change.

Your job as an academic library leader is to have a Theory of the Case that is the roadmap for your library — where you are going and why. It is the story you will tell your library’s staff, the campus administration and faculty, and your library’s donors and friends. The story can, and probably should, have some complexity, but you need to be able to convey the high points with a few bullet points.

You can, and should, change the case as the world changes. As John Maynard Keynes is often, though probably wrongly, quoted as saying when he was accused of reversing himself, “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?”⁶ When the facts no longer fit the case adjust your case, strategies, and the library’s roadmap.

An Example

I was the Dean of the IUPUI University Library for nearly 20 years beginning in 1999. I didn’t know I was creating a theory of the case, but through conference talks and writing, both published and unpublished works, this is what I did. I had been exploring Clayton M. Christensen’s ideas about disruption and how to build library collections in a digital world when in early 2007 I put together the first iteration of my Theory of the Case for academic libraries in an unpublished working paper, “A Model for Academic Libraries 2005 to 2025,”⁷ I refined the case in a number of presentations and published it later that year as “A Strategy for Academic Libraries in the First Quarter of the 21st Century” in *College & Research Libraries*.⁸ The article version was over 8,000 words. It had been a lot of work to pull my ideas together, but the result was a roadmap that I went back to again and again in thinking about priorities which led in turn to decisions about budget and staffing. What became clear to me in this process was that the critical issue was the way collections were constructed, both because that is where most of the library’s money was being spent and because that is where technology offered opportunities to alter practice.

The point here is not that you should adopt my Theory of the Case, rather you should develop your own based on your understanding of your library’s situation and your best judgement about the way the world works. That is your assessment of facts and theory.

How to Build Your Theory of the Case

Step One: Know the Facts and Theory

A Theory of the Case depends on facts, so to construct one, you first need to know what the facts are. Many of the facts will come from the literature. It is remarkable to me how little most librarians know of the research that supports their profession. Understanding Samuel C. Bradford’s Law of Scatter, published in 1934, would lead you to be highly suspicious of a journal publishers “big deal”.⁹ If you understand what Herman H. Fussler and Julian L. Simon¹⁰, Michael K. Buckland¹¹, and Allen Kent and his colleagues¹² demonstrated about book use, you would know that user-driven purchase models make good sense, certainly for e-books, but in many cases for print books as well. It is important to know this history. There is also much good current work done by OCLC Research and Ithaka S+R among others. To take just one example, the study of the growth of open access journal publication and its use by Heather Piwowar, Jason Priem, and Richard Orr should guide to how we see the future of open scholarly communication.¹³

In my view the best theory comes from outside the library world. For me Clayton M. Christensen's theories of innovation were foundational. Also important was the work of Mancur Olsen on the collective action, Elinor Ostrom on the commons, and the work of Andrew McAfee and Erik Brynjolfsson, Clay Shirky, and Yochai Benkler on the nature of the digital and network world.

The point here is that you need to be curious and to read and explore. It is almost certainly the case that you are not investing enough in yourself. Spend more time growing what you know and developing new skills and perspectives. I'd recommend that you make the time to investigate a question in some depth every month or so. You would be well served to develop some sort of alert system that brings research to your attention. I like the Inside Higher Ed and Open Access Tracking Project daily feeds, the Harvard Business Review update, as well as some Google alerts. Also, read books — current and classics — in business, economics, sociology, etc. that expose you to different ways of looking at the world. Academic coursework is better than workshops, though workshops will help you build your professional network.

Step Two: The First Two Questions

You need to begin by answering two questions:

1. What will/should scholarly communication look like?
2. What will/should teaching and learning look like?

The “will/should” is important. The “will” demands a clear headed assessment of what you expect to happen, understanding that the future is going to be different from the recent past. The “should” introduces the possibility that your actions can change the future for the better.

Both scholarly communication and instruction were significantly altered by the pandemic and there is no reason to believe they will return to what they were when the pandemic is behind us. Both were already in flux before the pandemic hit and it is likely that the pandemic accelerated changes that were already underway. Projecting the future, of course, has inherently uncertainty, but you still need to put down markers, make your best guess, and head down that path.

Step Three: The Next Question — How Do Organizations Work?

Leadership happens in a context. Most often that context is an organization. Just as you need to have a Theory of the Case about teaching and learning and about scholarly communication, you need a Theory of the Case for how organizations, especially colleges, universities, and academic libraries, work. In particular, you need to know the organization you work in works. A small liberal arts college is different from an urban university. What values drive your campus? What really counts for career

advancement? How is that different for librarians, other professionals and non-professional staff? What are the demographics of the library? Think about how providing leadership opportunities overlaps with organizational hierarchy and how technology will change jobs and roles over the next decade. It is your job to get the organization ready for what is coming. Your Theory of the Case needs to include how the library and the people who work in it will need to change, how new skills and capacities will be developed, and what the mix of staff and organizational structure will be.

Step Four: Write and Speak

Putting words to paper, or to the screen, forces you to be explicit. It makes your ideas tangible. It tests your thinking. Most importantly it makes it shareable. Beginning with friends and close colleagues, but eventually more broadly. Publications are good, but these days unpublished working papers deposited in your library's repository or blog posts provide less formal alternatives. Conference talks are also good as they provide a good way of honing your thoughts and getting immediate feedback. What is important is that you test your thinking. Find critics. You don't have to believe everything they say, but hearing what they say inevitably sharpens your thinking.

Step Five: Say It Over and Over Again

Your Theory of the Case is only useful if you share it. In my experience, you can never underestimate how little people hear and retain when you think they are listening to you. The people you are talking to live busy lives. They are thinking about their problems when you think you are getting their full attention. Once you have your Theory of the Case repeat it every chance you get, and create opportunities to repeat it again. The library staff needs to understand where you are trying to take them, even if they don't want to go there. The faculty need to understand how you think the library needs to respond to changes in scholarly communication, even when you know telling them will be uncomfortable. The campus administration needs to know how you want to spend your budget and you have to convince them that it makes sense. Your friends, community partners, and donors need to know how they fit into and can contribute to the library's future. There is way less downside to being a broken record than surprising people who you thought had heard what you were saying, but didn't.

Final Word

All of this is to say that one of the jobs of a leader is to choose the path. We are living in times where the path is not clear and it is unlikely to be the path of the last generation. If there was any doubt, 2020 has made sure this will not be the case. So, you can't simply follow what your first mentor or old boss did. Your job is to create your own

Theory of the Case, to find your own route on your own map. In my view, it is the most important thing today's library leaders need to do.

Notes

- ¹ Kery Murakami, "Colleges: Financial Toll of Coronavirus Worse Than Anticipated," *Inside Higher Ed* September 29, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2020/09/29/colleges-financial-toll-coronavirus-worse-anticipated>
- ² Shawn Hubler, "Colleges Slash Budgets in the Pandemic, With 'Nothing Off-Limits'," *New York Times* October 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/26/us/colleges-coronavirus-budget-cuts.html>
- ³ Fredrick, Jennifer, Roger C. Schonfeld and Christine Wolf-Eisenberg. 2020. "The Impacts of COVID-19 on Academic Library Budgets: Fall 2020." *Scholarly Kitchen*, December 9, 2020, par. 12, <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2020/12/09/academic-library-budgets-fall-2020/>
- ⁴ "Case Theory in a Nutshell," http://www.benchmarkinstitute.org/t_by_t/tahst/case_theory_nutshell.pdf accessed October 29, 2020.
- ⁵ "Theory of the Case Law and Legal Definition," USLegal.com, <https://definitions.uslegal.com/t/theory-of-the-case/> accessed October 29, 2020
- ⁶ "When the Facts Change, I Change My Mind. What Do You Do, Sir," *Quote Investigator*, <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2011/07/22/keynes-change-mind/> accessed October 29, 2020.
- ⁷ David W. Lewis, "A Model for Academic Libraries 2005 to 2025," January 12, 2007, <https://doi.org/10.7912/C2C64F>
- ⁸ David W. Lewis, "A Strategy for Academic Libraries in the First Quarter of the 21st Century," *College & Research Libraries* 68(5):418-434 September 2007, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.68.5.418>
- ⁹ Samuel C. Bradford, "Sources of Information on Specific Subjects," *Engineering: An Illustrated Weekly Journal* (London), 137(26):85–86, January 26, 1934, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/016555158501000406> (paywall) also see "Bradford's Law," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bradford%27s_law accessed November 14, 2020.
- ¹⁰ Herman H. Fussler and Julian L. Simon, *Patterns in the Use of Books in Large Research Libraries*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1969.
- ¹¹ Michael K. Buckland, *Book Availability and the Library User*, New York, NY: Pergamon Press Inc., 1975.
- ¹² Allen Kent, et. al., *Use of Library Materials: The University of Pittsburgh Study*, New York, NY: Marcel Dekker, Inc., 1979.
- ¹³ Heather Piwowar, Jason Priem, and Richard Orr, "The Future of OA: A Large-Scale Analysis Projecting Open Access Publication and Readership," *BioRxiv*, October 9, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1101/795310>